

Ambassadorial Experiences | part 7

## Nelson Mandela in the clutches of the African National Congress (ANC)



It was a hot, sunny day on February 10, 1990 when Nelson Mandela, after having spent 27 years in prison, was due to be finally released in Cape Town.

High and unexpected drama accompanied his release. Exactly at 3 p.m. in the afternoon, the world waited for his appearance outside Cape Town. Many national and international TV stations were present to broadcast this historic event, but Mandela did not appear. The clock was ticking and everyone got nervous. When he still did not show up at half past three the nervousness turned to desperation.

What for heavens sake was happening? The South African TV stations at that time quite unprepared for the unexpected, nervously referred back all the time to their home base because they did not manage to fill in the gap by previously prepared stories. When at a quarter to four there was still no sign of the famous person, stories made the round that the dreaded Apartheid regime probably had played again one of their despicable tricks on Mandela – or perhaps he even might have been killed.

Finally, at four o'clock Nelson, holding hands with his wife Winnie, came out smiling and waving to the crowd. Few Diplomatic observers, including myself as then dean of the Corps, knew beforehand that Mandela was genuinely a man of peace and reconciliation. Therefore, all of us expected that his first public speech two hours later at the main square in Cape Town would reflect his stance and mind.

To our great surprise, even shock Mandela held a very bellicose, aggressive and uncompromising speech and was cheered by the crowd of his African National extremist followers. Those who had expected otherwise were deeply disturbed and speechless.

There was a secret to all that which Nelson Mandela confided to me personally some time thereafter under the strict obligation to maintain silence. He had – expectedly – prepared a conciliatory speech, but when the hardliners of the ANC saw his draft they protested and told their leader that by no means is he going to stretch out his hand to the white enemies.

Mandela, therefore was under enormous stress to rewrite his speech – the only time to do it was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon-therefore his delay.

I had honoured his request for confidentiality for a very long time.

Five day after his release, I managed to get him and his wife for a strictly private briefing at a small room in the Airport Hotel in Johannesburg. The Ambassadors travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg and we all were deeply impressed and thrilled by two hours of Nelson Mandela's mapping out his and the country's future. The session ended by a joint press conference between Mandela and me as host- carried by major international networks. At that occasion Nelson for the first time coined the phrase which later on became famous and frequently quoted: *"I have no intention to replace white by black domination."*

A truly momentous and historic moment which I shall remember until the end of my days.

We are looking forward to receiving your comments!

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#### *About the author*



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